

# Air Force Engineering Made in France

## *Little-known mission a big job for Elmendorf engineers*



by MSgt Kenneth Fidler  
*16th Expeditionary Operations Group Public Affairs*

Four Air Force guys, a room full of power tools, and almost 1 million square feet of working space. TV's Tim "The Tool Man" Taylor would be overjoyed.

That's what confronted four engineers from the 3rd Civil Engineer Squadron, Elmendorf Air Force Base, AK, when they arrived at Istres Air Base, France, in February for a 90-day deployment.

"We thought we were going to meet up with a bigger CE unit," said MSgt Bill Gann, environmental engineer and CE team chief. "Turns out, we were the CE team for the whole deployment."

This little-known mission became a big chore for Gann and his three engineers, TSgt Aubrey Goff, an electrician; SSgt John Douglas, a structural craftsman; and A1C Sean Blanchard, a power production journeyman. The 970,000 square feet of real estate comes with enough clogged pipes, power problems, leaks, and grounds maintenance (even snaring a snake) to keep any CE crew busy.

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**SSgt John Douglas cuts the frame of a metal cage door as part of a project to expand a storage area for the U.S. Air Force detachment at Istres, France. (Photo by MSgt Kenneth Fidler)**

The CE team was among approximately 180-200 active duty and Air National Guard personnel deployed to a small U.S. Air Force detachment, the 16th Expeditionary Operations Group, located at this French air base approximately 40 kilometers from Marseilles. About 50-60 of the group are active duty personnel on 90-day Aerospace Expeditionary Force deployment orders.

The Air National Guard runs the flying mission, rotating its 17 tanker units every month, with intra-unit personnel rotations every two weeks. Three active duty aircrews and a handful of maintenance personnel from McConnell AFB, KS, join them every two months. The crews fly KC-135 Stratotankers that refuel U.S. and NATO aircraft patrolling the skies over the Balkan region under NATO's Operation JOINT FORGE.

The U.S. Air Force has had an expeditionary mission here since 1994. Prior to 1997, U-2 reconnaissance planes flew out of Istres. The U-2s moved to southern Italy, but the refueling tankers stayed on French soil.

The engineers won't soon forget their tour at Istres. The hangar in which the unit operates measures more than three football fields in length and about one in width. The Air Force leases the hangar from the French aerospace company, Dassault Aviation.

"It's 900 meters all the way around; I walked it with





**TSgt Aubrey Goff (left) and MSgt Bill Gann cheer a French youngster's tennis ball toss during a visit to the U.S. Air Force detachment at Istres. The boy, Quentin, is affiliated with a local shelter that provides transition assistance to families who have been victims of domestic abuse. The 16th Expeditionary Operations Group played host to the children for a day of fun and games. The CE team built the wooden game boards for the children. (Photo by MSgt Keith Reed)**

the measuring wheel because I was going to mark off a jogging path when the weather got better," Goff said.

They were welcomed on their second day, Feb. 19, with a lightning storm that knocked out the power. Looking for the circuit breakers — some hidden — proved difficult. The hangar has 20 main circuit breakers and hundreds of smaller ones.

The next week, they walked 8,000 feet of taxiway to install reflectors every 50 to 200 feet for nighttime flying operations. They walked in 60 mph winds called the Mistral, which are notorious in this region in springtime, and measured the distance with a measuring wheel.

"I was worried about getting here and having nothing to do," said Douglas, recalling his deployment preparation. "I brought tons of books, thinking I'd have nothing to do when work was over." The team worked every day for the first two months, averaging 10-12 hours a day, taking one Sunday off. They built walls in offices, patched the hangar floor, fixed weed-eaters and lawn mowers, painted parking ramp lines, unplugged bathroom drains, and added 200 square feet of storage area for the base exchange.

"You name it, we've done it," he said, including replacing more than 100 fluorescent light bulbs and installing more than 150 smoke detectors.

One project came with the spread of foot-and-mouth disease in the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe. "We treated all the food trash with acid," Gann said. "In the beginning, we had to take it over to the French side for disposal because they had very strict procedures; later, we disposed of it ourselves."

Blanchard handled hazardous waste disposal, keeping

track of used oil, hydraulic fluid and batteries from aircraft maintenance.

He did other things he probably wouldn't do at Elmendorf, like training incoming units on how to use the one U.S. and two French-made fire extinguishers near the maintenance area. "That's a firefighter area, but we didn't have firefighters. So, every Guard rotation I showed them how to use the fire extinguishers at the other end of the hangar."

Col Bill Smith, who's been the 16th EOG commander since December, said the sheer size of the hangar is probably the biggest challenge for civil engineers.

"The hangar is an immense 80,000 square meters and requires extensive maintenance," Smith said. "The French stopped using this hangar in the mid-70s, so very little was done on the building until the Americans took over in the mid-90s. The plumbing and electrical and water systems are outdated and need constant repair."

Smith added that he was "impressed" with how the CE team managed to keep up with a big workload and find time to volunteer in charitable ways.

On May 16, the unit played host to children from a local transition shelter for women who have suffered domestic abuse. "It was the CE folks who built games for the kids and stayed around to entertain them throughout the afternoon," Smith said. "Truly a great group of professionals."

As the group prepared to re-deploy to Elmendorf, Gann looked back on the deployment. "We left this place better than we found it," he said, "and the things-to-do list is ready for the next crew."